



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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Statement of Chairman Floyd D. Spence

Reaction to Release of Downing Report on Saudi Bombing

Based on my initial review of General Downing's report, I believe that it will serve to greatly clarify and detail the circumstances which led to the tragic June 25 terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia. I would point out that his report largely mirrors the conclusions reached in the August 14 House National Security Committee staff report on this incident and will help to focus needed attention on the issues raised in both reports.

Both reports correctly highlight the fundamental intelligence failings and shortcomings in properly quantifying and predicting the threat facing our forces in Saudi Arabia following the first bombing attack in November, 1995. While intelligence is always the first to be blamed in these incidents, I believe the criticism is justified and deserving of further investigation and review if we are to continue placing our personnel in similar situations in the future.

Further, I am particularly concerned with the institutional and organizational failings identified in both reports. Most of these problems lie with the confusion and denial over the status of the U.S. mission in Saudi Arabia. The Downing report merely confirms the obvious – Operation Southern Watch is a long-term U.S. military commitment resourced and organized as though it were a short-term contingency operation. The resultant undermanning of units and constant rotation of personnel due to short tours of duty directly contributed to the ineffective force protection so tragically demonstrated on June 25.

Responsibility for this situation, as the report points out, rests squarely with the chain of command. As the command vested with responsibility for the region, Central Command is rightly criticized for a number of failings and omissions. The report also criticizes the Joint Chiefs of Staff for its failure to challenge the command relationships, structures and resources of the U.S. operation as its mission expanded, its mandate lengthened and the threat changed. However, while the JCS has an important role to play in these matters, it is an advisory body that is not in the chain of command.

Therefore, I believe that the committee's hearing scheduled for this Wednesday will be essential to a fuller understanding of these matters. While the Administration is to be commended for aggressively attacking the force protection issue following the bombing, fundamental and serious questions remain as to how such a tragedy was permitted to occur.

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